

In 1977 the Benedictine monk and architect Dom Hans van der Laan (1904-1991) publishes his book *De Architectonische Ruimte. Vijftien Lessen over de Dispositie van het Menselijk Verblijf* [Architectonic Space, fifteen lessons on the disposition of the human habitat]. It is an amplification of his first book *Le nombre plastique. Quinze leçons sur l'ordonnance architectonique* [Het plastische getal. Fifteen lessons on architectonic ordinance], an architectural design manual published in 1960. As the introduction of *Le nombre plastique* explains, Van der Laan aims to 'restore, in all its objectivity, the fundamental and intrinsic architectural laws.' The design methodology that he presents in order to achieve these laws in the building practice is based on the discernment, the human ability to differentiate sizes. It evolves around the concept of the margin, the boundary of the differences that only just can be perceived as a building stone for architecture. Besides this theory, Dom van der Laan develops an architectural style, which can best be described as elementary architecture. He regards his own realisations as specimen of his architectural theory. Although his production is rather limited, only four convents and a house, it formulates a tangible and concrete background for his architectural doctrine.

Dom van der Laan's architectural theory centres around LOOKING and MAKING as an intellectual activity: ORDERING. Within the field of architectural design practice his work is known and highly esteemed. But although his buildings in Vaals and Waasmunster have become a pilgrimage for architects, and his book inspires many contemporary architects, it is unclear how the potential of the theory can be applied in the architectural practice.

Also, despite previous publications, as Padovan's monograph *Modern Primitive* and Michel Remery's *Mystery and Matter*, the work of Dom Hans van der Laan remains within a vacuum. This problematic has its roots within Van der Laan's own writings. He entangled his theories with his personal quest to define an absolute architectural doctrine. The book *Architectonic Space* aims to formulate a universal foundation, not only for architecture, but directly for his own proportional system: the plastic number. As such, Van der Laan presented the plastic number as the only possible means to achieve an immanent architecture. In the process of doing so he obscured his references and romanticised his own biography, which makes it practically impossible to assess and evaluate the work itself. Only by rooting Dom Hans van der Laan's work in its context and by linking it to its historiography, a more in-depth and critical understanding of *Architectonic Space* can be achieved.

To unravel and demystify *Architectonic Space*, this research addresses two different research questions, resulting in two interwoven, dialectic parts.

The first approach focuses on the genealogy and evolution, as well as the historiography, of the work of Dom Hans van der Laan. What are his motivations? What is the context in which the work can be situated? What are the relevant influences that shaped Van der Laan's own thoughts? Why this central focus on the proportional system of the "plastic number" and how is this more than a mere formal aesthetics? Through the analysis of drawings, unpublished source material and his personal correspondence, the intrinsic relation between Van der Laan's motivations and main sources, his teaching and realizations is mapped out. It shows how the hierarchical deep-level structure that Van der Laan is searching for grows from his Benedictine and architectural background. It describes his struggle and attempts to define and redefine his theories through different influences, and as such it becomes possible to reframe them more critically.

The second research question focuses on the actual practical application of the plastic number in Van der Laan's work. How does his design methodology feed into his design practice? What is the ground for his elementary architecture? Interwoven with the historical reconstruction of the first approach, this part is conceived as an annotated catalogue. As a red thread on Dom van der Laan's design methodology and its application, it historically maps all of his design sketches, analytical diagrams, abstract models and realised projects. As such, it gives a clear account on the evolution of Van der Laan's design methodology and how it actually works. It shows how his abstract archetypal models evolve into patterns and formulas that feed into his own elementary architecture. It explains Van der Laan's main concepts of the margin, the plastic number and of architectonic space, which intertwines mutual nearness and dynamic superposition. As such, it provides an all-comprising design manual on the methodology of architectonic space.

What is revealed is a design theory that incorporates concepts from the fields of Gestalt theory and phenomenology in a practical manner, dealing with architecture as ordering space through perception. As such, it offers more insights in aesthetics, and the act of designing through looking and making. But equally, it provides a design methodology that works from the plastic number as a series of ratios, ultimately more rich and flexible than proportional systems that are based on the golden section.